

1 Samuel 8:4-11, (12-15), 16-20, (11:14-15)
Psalm 138
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1
Mark 3:20-35

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What is Family?

A Sunday school teacher was teaching the children, who were about 5 and 6, about the Ten Commandments. She explained about the commandment to “Honor thy father and mother.” She asked is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters? Without skipping a beat one little boy said, “Thou shall not kill.”¹

Just who are our brothers and sisters? Families are funny things. Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian author and mystic, wrote in the very first line of his novel, *Anna Karenina*, “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” I think there is a great deal of truth in this statement. Families are not easy, even in the best of circumstances. The word, “family” is what one of my seminary professors would call a “heavily freighted word.” It carries with it a great deal of emotional baggage, some good and some not so good, depending on our particular family circumstances and our experiences.

As we grow up, mature and get knocked around a bit by the vagaries of life, we may discover that our concept of what constitutes a “family” may gradually expand and deepen far beyond our blood relations or maybe even in place of them. Jesus’ unsettling comments about “family” in today’s gospel reading are both shocking and encouraging at the same time. Jesus challenges us to see each other as our brother or sister, embracing the reality of our connection to each other as fellow human beings.

It is early in Jesus’ ministry and yet he has already created quite a scandal in his home town. He has just called his inner circle of twelve; a rather motley crew which includes simple fishermen, a tax collector that everyone loves to hate and a physician that is a Gentile, not even a Jew. Jesus has healed the sick and lame without any regard of their social status or lack of. He and his followers eat without washing their hands and continue to do good works even on the Sabbath.

These radical acts of compassion, healing and openness are unsettling at best and threatening to upset the entire status quo at worst.² His unorthodox actions cut sharply against the very grain of the strictly circumscribed mores of this ancient religious Middle Eastern

¹ Ian S. Markam and Samantha R.E. Gottlich, *Lectionary Levity*, (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 141.

² Wendy Farley, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3*, eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 118.

society. The local religious leaders are deeply agitated and worried as they witness from a distance the growing crowds that follow Jesus and hang on his every word. They are threatened by the extraordinary effect that this beloved son of Mary and Joseph of Nazareth has on the teeming crowds; the maimed, the poor, the sick and outcasts. These are the ones who are pushed to the margins of society but they are also painfully aware of their brokenness and their need for healing. They understand who Jesus is. They know he is the one who can make them whole and that is why they are so intent to follow him.

How ironic and tragic that those closest to him, his family, and those most like him, the religious leaders who are steeped in the knowledge of Scripture, have no idea who Jesus really is.³ When the scribes accuse Jesus of being possessed by demonic forces they reveal their total lack of understanding of how the Holy Spirit is working in the lives of those who are following Jesus. They mistake the in-breaking work of the Spirit for evil and madness.⁴ How tragic.

Jesus is livid. He turns to the scribes and angrily calls them out. They are the ones who have committed the ultimate blasphemy because they cannot tell the difference from evil forces (Mark's Gospel refers to as "the strong man") and the power of the Holy Spirit. They are so blinded by their pious legalism they can't see that the man in front of them is from God. As such they are the ones who have committed the unforgiveable sin,⁵ refusing to accept the flow of God's love into the world.

Jesus' family sees the angry look in the eyes of the scribes and Pharisees and this causes them to worry for his safety. Truth be told, his family is also terribly embarrassed. Their beloved son and brother has caused a horrendous scene right in their hometown where everybody knows everybody's business. Several folks, including his family members, think Jesus must be crazy or simply out of his mind to behave in such an unorthodox manner. Why would he be so cruel as to turn his back on his own family when they urge him to come home and stop all this foolishness. Instead, Jesus seems makes the situation even worse. He asks "Who are my mother and brothers?" (Mark 3:33). Then, he turns and points to the crowd pressing in on him, the leper, the man with the withered hand, the tax collector, the misfits, the widowed, the orphaned, and his disciples who seem clueless. With a sweeping arm Jesus says this is my family – they are my mother, my sister and my brother. They follow the will of God. Anyone who does likewise is part of God's family.

If we could fast forward this scene today and we would see folks from AA meetings, self-help or bereavement groups. The crowd may include a group of single mothers who struggle to make ends meet, working 2 or 3 jobs. There would be immigrants and refugees from all over the world who are determined to build a new life, starting over with a little bit of nothing. In the crowd you would likely see military veterans who are without limbs, paralyzed or disfigured from their combat tours in the Middle East. There would be folks whose struggles may not be apparent from the outside but on the inside they are battling depression, anxiety or suicidal thoughts. The crowd would include transgender teens and adults who are desperate for a loving and supportive community. There would be the elderly who are literally dying from loneliness. And, most assuredly, there would be the children, living in war zones, who are orphaned and maimed who have never known a day of peace in their lifetime.

³ Farley, 118.

⁴ Id, 118.

⁵ Id, 118.

These are the folks that surround Jesus. This wonderful, messy, imperfect but most holy gathering of human souls, coming all shapes, sizes and colors. These are our mothers, our sisters and our brothers. They are us. We are all family. Not because of our DNA but because we are bound in our human brokenness and our yearning to be healed; to be made whole; to welcome the Holy Spirit breaking into our lives as we strive to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

One of my earliest memories is going to the fish market in Japan with our housekeeper, Yoshiko. I would consider her my very first friend. She would take my hand and we would walk around all the smelly fish stalls and before going home she would buy me a small bag of rice crackers as a special treat. I recall her kindness and gentleness which means everything to a 3-year-old child. Even though she only spoke Japanese, we did not look like and we came from very different cultures Yoshiko was like a mother to me and I loved her. She was my family. And, we are all part of God's family, each and every one of us. As Paul encourages us to not lose heart as we stumble along, seeing the healing love we find in Jesus. This is the mystery of grace, Jesus calling us into his inner circle of love.

Amen.